

Ambassador Gillian A. Milovanovic Interview with Tea Moderna – Weekly Magazine

1. **Q:** Ambassador Milovanovic, how does it look to you, have three years of your Ambassadorial term of office in Macedonia passed quickly?

A: The time has gone very quickly for me and for my whole family. Macedonia is a fascinating country, where something is always happening. Sometimes it is politics of course, or high level visitors, but also concerts, art exhibits, academic achievement ceremonies, and commemorations and celebrations throughout the country. The many warm and hospitable people we have met, with whom we have shared many happy and interesting times, have made the time pass very pleasantly but also incredibly quickly. We are sorry to see this period in our lives come to an end but we will always remain connected to Macedonia.

2. **Q:** How would you describe Macedonia?

A: As a beautiful and welcoming country, blessed in so many ways. You still have a big job ahead to develop your unique and varied human, natural and cultural riches, but with determination you will succeed. Macedonia's people have a wealth of talent that should be treasured and supported, not wasted through lack of support and lack of opportunity. Your citizens are incredibly creative. If they look beyond the list of problems and focus their individual and collective energy on finding and implementing solutions they can meet any challenge. Of course developments in the larger region and beyond have their impact on Macedonia, but you can shape your own future, not by looking to the past and turning inward, but by facing outward and concentrating on making your place in Europe and Euro-Atlantic institutions a practical reality. People here are sometimes unreasonably discouraged by setbacks. I myself am rationally optimistic that citizens who take an active role in public and economic life can shape their present and future.

3. **Q:** Which are the good sides and which are the not so good sides of this country?

A: The physical beauty and variety of Macedonia is extraordinary. The wildflowers that paint the fields in exquisite colors in June, the snow-covered peaks seen against a bright blue sky in winter, the mountains and the lakes, the valley of the Vardar with its storks. Less good is the drive to many of these places along

trash-lined roads and the garbage dumped in otherwise beautiful natural and historical sites. There is a huge need to start teaching school children not to litter so they will teach their parents, and there needs to be a clean-up that continues on a regular basis.

4. **Q:** How much of Macedonia have you seen? Where would you like to go more? Are there places that have special value to you and what beauty would you single out in Macedonia?

A: I have been to many of the municipalities in Skopje, to Tetovo and Gostivar, to Bitola, Debar, Kumanovo and Staro Nagoricani, to Kavadarci, Veles, Debar and Berovo, to Ohrid, Struga, Gevgelija and Stip. Despite many kind invitations to visit, there are many other cities and sites I was not able to visit, so I'll just have to return as a visitor – I'm sure I will.

Among my favorite places are the village of Zeleznec in Demir Hisar municipality, the lake and the city of Ohrid, together with Struga, Sveti Naum and the source of the Drim, the historic center and museum of Bitola, Stobi, Sveti Pantelemon, Joachim Ostrogorski, Sveti Spas, the painted mosque, and all the places I spoke of earlier in our interview.

5. **Q:** Citizens of Skopje could often see you and your husband taking a walk in the city, going for shopping in Vero or the green market, or just enjoying walking along Vardar bank. Do citizens approach you? What is their attitude? What do they ask you?

A: People have always been very warm and welcoming. Sometimes they were surprised to see me doing ordinary things like buying groceries, or having burek or kebapi, but they respected my private time, which I really appreciated. And of course I am always happy to talk with those who want to talk to me. Mostly they tell me about their own connections to the United States or perhaps how they view our efforts to help Macedonia achieve its goals. I get a lot of encouragement from their kind words, and their appreciation for the partnership, friendship and support of the United States.

6. **Q:** You are considered sociable person and you have made friendships in Macedonia. On two occasions, you even hosted New Year celebration in your home and you also celebrate Saints Day every year in the family. In a way, as an Ambassador of the U.S., you show openness and give a different picture of you and your family.

A: Well, it is easy to be sociable in Macedonia where people like to get together over a meal or a coffee or just to talk. And in my family we really enjoy traditions and celebrations, both our own and new ones that we learn about from living in other countries. For us Macedonia and Skopje in particular have been very much home and in many ways they will always continue to be.

7. **Q:** Is there an event, a gesture or a meeting that you will keep as special in your memory and will talk about it wherever you go to resume your diplomatic career?

A: I could cite professional events, but what really sticks in my mind is Tose's last concert at the stadium. He was a great artist and an even greater humanitarian. Through USAID we co-sponsored his charity concert to raise money for your schools. He immediately agreed to the event which ultimately raised the largest amount of money ever raised in Macedonia. Tose did not just feel sorry for people or list all the problems he saw and look to others for solutions. He felt a personal obligation to change things for the better. That in itself is an extraordinary lesson, and should be a practical inspiration to all of us, including me personally. Tose brought out the best in people. The night of the concert was incredible. You could see and feel the emotion, even the love. There was an extraordinary personal human connection between Tose and his audience that I will never forget.

8. **Q:** Do you like the Macedonian cuisine?

A: Very much. And I will take many Macedonian recipes with me to prepare in other parts of the world. Though many things cannot be duplicated outside your country because you have very special ingredients that are not available elsewhere. One more reason for me to visit in the future!

9. **Q:** When was it hardest to you as an American diplomat in Macedonia in these three years?

A: Honestly, it has never been hard for me here. There have been professional challenges of course, for example after the 2006 elections when relations between government and opposition were very strained and we worked for many months with our EU colleagues to foster productive dialogue. There was the delayed invitation to Macedonia to join NATO despite meeting NATO criteria, and there remains the challenge of facilitating the successful conclusion of the U.N. process to reach mutual agreement between Macedonia and Greece on the name issue. But these and other challenges did not make life hard for me. So long as we have

partners – of all parties and ethnicities—who are prepared to be flexible, who want to find solutions and are genuinely dedicated to Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic future, to fully implementing the Framework Agreement and necessary reforms, and to creating the conditions for shared economic prosperity for all citizens, any effort we make is a pleasure.

10. **Q:** Where do you see Macedonia in future? What is our perspective?

A: Your perspective is clearly membership in NATO and the EU with all the positives that this will bring. Achieving that future is in your hands and the US will be with you as you strive for it. Not every effort is immediately successful, but the goal is worth overcoming a few setbacks and in the end perseverance wins out.

If your political and economic leaders, the public, academia and the media support genuine reform and serious improvements in the rule of law; if they resist the temptation to look mainly inward and focus instead on achieving Macedonia’s place in the larger European and Euro-Atlantic family as the best, most secure, and most rewarding way to guarantee Macedonia’s identity as a multi-ethnic democracy, you can reach your goals.

Question for Mr. Milovanovic: What is my view on Macedonia?

When the Macedonian Bar Association (AKRM) invited me to be an honored guest at their assembly earlier this year, it was a great pleasure and a privilege for me. On one hand, it was recognition of my academic work here. On the other, for me, it was special recognition of my multiple and deep links with Skopje and with Macedonia.

I am in a very special position in Skopje. As a member of the diplomatic community and as a teacher, I am explaining the U.S. and the EU, i.e. the West. As an old hand in this region, I am explaining Macedonia to those who do not know much about it. I am an interpreter in several directions. Occasionally, I interpret from Macedonian to English and vice versa.

Skopje is one of my favorite cities and places. Years ago, in Sydney, Australia, my wife and I saw a performance of “The Liberation of Skopje” by KPGT. Our Australian friends wanted to know more about Skopje. We had long conversations about Macedonia, its history and traditions.

Today, years later, I can say that I identify fully with Skopje. De facto, I am a citizen of Skopje. I am enjoying a country of light, so described by Venko Andonovski and Gligor

Stojkovski, a light coming through the “iris” of Kokino! This light is more than 4000 years old and we all need it! Europe needs it!

Skopje is forever!

Question for Anna Milovanovic: Why I want to live in Macedonia?

I want to stay in Macedonia because it has become my home. I have met so many welcoming and generous people during my 3 years here and now I plan on contributing to the community that has given so much to me. I love this country because it has given me a lifetime of possible projects, the love of my life, my independence, and an amazing social life. After my International Relations studies, I hope to help make this nation truly successful in the areas I will now describe.

Macedonia needs a fresh start. It needs to demolish ethnic stereotyping in everyday life. Ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in this nation face the same problems of survival -when you earn 200 Euros a month and your apartment in Skopje costs 300 Euros, life becomes about priorities and hard work. I hope that Macedonia’s citizens will begin to help each other and not focus so much on political and other divisions or on the recent history of this region, as there are only 2 million people here. United, Macedonia's citizens can improve law enforcement and support entrepreneurial ideas. I am certain that ethnic differences will fade as all the communities begin to prosper and no-one will be able to generalize about the other ethnic group getting jobs, visas, or a higher salary. I see a new purpose to my life here as I form a group of people willing to truly help the citizens of this country. I see my own future here and I want it to be a good one -- shared with everyone in Macedonia.

Question for Alexandra Milovanovic: What I like most about Macedonia?

There are many things I like about Macedonia. For one, the food: there is no place where I cannot find something tasty! I go to Anja, to Destan for the kebapi, to Frutti di Mare, for the fish, to Shanghai restaurant for the Chinese food, to Nobu for the sushi, and to many other places with my family. I love burek and pindjur and all the skara--I am always eating in Macedonia, and moving away will be difficult!

Another thing I enjoy is driving in Skopje. This may seem surprising, but I am used to it, I started learning how to drive here. It makes sense to me, even if people do not respect the rules of the road very often. It is more of a challenge when you have people passing you on the right side, driving on sidewalks, and honking all the time at you! When I go back to the US, it will be much more difficult not to fall asleep at the wheel!

I like also how at home I can watch programs in so many languages. You have Macedonian, Slovenian, Albanian, Serbian, Arabic, French, Italian, Croatian channels, everything!

So I like the food, the TV and the driving, but also the fact that people are so open and friendly and welcoming. People I have never met want to help me and feed me, and this one cannot find in many places.

I will miss living in Skopje for all these reasons, but I will be back to visit!